





CHAPTER 3

Plates of Gold

This is chapter 3 of the new four-volume narrative history of the Church titled Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days. The book will be available in 14 languages in print, in the Church History section of the Gospel Library app, and online at saints.lds.org. The next several chapters will be published in upcoming issues until volume 1 is released later this year. Those chapters will be available in 47 languages in the Gospel Library app and at saints.lds.org. Chapter 2 describes Joseph's First Vision—seeing the Father and the Son in the spring of 1820.

Three years passed, and three harvests. Joseph spent most days clearing land, turning soil, and working as a hired hand to raise money for the yearly cash payment on the family's property. The work made it impossible for him to attend school very often, and he spent most of his free time with family or other laborers.

Joseph and his friends were young and lighthearted. Sometimes they made foolish mistakes, and Joseph found that being forgiven once did not mean he would never need to repent again. Nor did his glorious vision answer every question or forever end his confusion.¹ So he tried to stay close to God. He read his Bible, trusted in Jesus Christ's power to save him, and obeyed the Lord's command not to join any church.

Like many people in the area, including his father, Joseph believed that God could reveal knowledge through objects like rods and stones, as He had done with Moses, Aaron, and others in the Bible.² One day, while Joseph was helping a neighbor dig a well, he came across a small stone buried deep in the earth. Aware that people sometimes used special stones to search for lost objects or hidden treasure, Joseph wondered if he had found such a stone.

Looking into it, he saw things invisible to the natural eye.³

Joseph's gift for using the stone impressed family members, who saw it as a sign of divine favor.⁴ But even though he had the gift of a seer, Joseph was still unsure if God was pleased with him. He could no longer feel the forgiveness and peace he had felt after his vision of the Father and Son. Instead, he often felt condemned for his weakness and imperfections.⁵

On September 21, 1823, 17-year-old Joseph lay awake in the loft bedroom he shared with his brothers. He had stayed up late that evening, listening to his family talk about different churches and the doctrines they taught. Now everyone was asleep, and the house was quiet.⁶

In the darkness of his room, Joseph began to pray, pleading fervently that God would forgive his sins. He longed to commune with a heavenly messenger who could assure him of his standing before the Lord and give him the knowledge of the gospel he had been promised in the grove. Joseph knew God had answered his prayers before, and he had full confidence that He would answer again.

As Joseph prayed, a light appeared beside his bed and grew brighter until it filled the entire loft. Joseph looked up and saw an angel standing in the air. The angel wore a seamless white robe that came down to his wrists and ankles. Light radiated from him, and his face shone like lightning.

At first Joseph was afraid, but peace soon filled him. The angel called him by name and introduced himself as Moroni.



Near Palmyra, New York, the Hill Cumorah is about three miles (4.8 km) southeast of the Smith family farm. Joseph knew where to go to find the Book of Mormon plates buried there because Moroni had shown him the hill in vision.

to resist wondering how much they were worth. He had heard tales of hidden treasures protected by guardian spirits, but Moroni and the plates he described were different from these stories. Moroni was a heavenly messenger appointed by God to deliver the record safely to His chosen seer. And the plates were valuable not because they were gold, but because they witnessed of Jesus Christ.

Still, Joseph could not help thinking that he now knew exactly where to find enough treasure to free his family from poverty.¹⁷

Arriving at the hill, Joseph located the place he had seen in the vision and began digging at the base of the rock until its edges were clear. He then found a large tree branch and used it as a lever to raise the stone and heave it aside.¹⁸

Beneath the boulder was a box, its walls and base made of stone. Looking inside, Joseph saw the gold plates, seer stones, and breastplate.¹⁹ The plates were covered with ancient writing and bound together on one side by three rings. Each plate was about six inches (15 cm) wide, eight inches (20 cm) long, and thin. A portion of the plates also appeared to be sealed so no one could read it.²⁰

Astonished, Joseph wondered again how much the plates were worth. He reached for them—and felt a shock pulse through him. He jerked his hand back but then reached for the plates twice more and was shocked each time.

“Why can I not obtain this book?” he cried out.

“Because you have not kept the commandments of the Lord,” said a voice nearby.²¹

Joseph turned and saw Moroni. At once the message from the night before flooded his mind, and he understood that he had forgotten the record’s true purpose. He started to pray, and his mind and soul awoke to the Holy Spirit.

“Look,” Moroni commanded. Another vision unfolded before Joseph, and he saw Satan surrounded by his numberless host. “All this is shown, the good and the evil, the holy and impure, the glory of God and the power of darkness,” the angel declared, “that you may know hereafter the two powers and never be influenced or overcome by that wicked one.”

He instructed Joseph to purify his heart and strengthen his mind to receive the record. “If ever these sacred things are obtained they must be by prayer and faithfulness in obeying the Lord,” Moroni explained. “They are not deposited here for the sake of accumulating gain and wealth for the glory of this world. They were sealed by the prayer of faith.”²²

Joseph asked when he could have the plates.

“The twenty-second day of September next,” Moroni said, “if you bring the right person with you.”

“Who is the right person?” Joseph asked.

“Your oldest brother.”²³

Ever since he was a child, Joseph knew he could rely on his oldest brother. Alvin was twenty-five years old now and could have acquired his own farm if he wanted. But he had chosen to stay on the family farm to help his parents get settled and secure on their land as they got older. He was

serious and hardworking, and Joseph loved and admired him immensely.²⁴

Maybe Moroni felt that Joseph needed his brother's wisdom and strength to become the kind of person the Lord could trust with the plates.

Returning home that evening, Joseph was tired. But his family crowded around him as soon as he came through the door, eager to know what he had found at the hill. Joseph started to tell them about the plates, but Alvin interrupted when he noticed how weary Joseph looked.

"Let us go to bed," he said, "and we will get up early in the morning and go to work." They would have plenty of time tomorrow to hear the rest of Joseph's story. "If Mother will get our suppers early," he said, "we will then have a fine long evening and all sit down and hear you talk."²⁵

The next evening, Joseph shared what had happened at the hill, and Alvin believed him. As the oldest son in the family, Alvin had always felt responsible for his aging parents' physical welfare. He and his brothers had even started building a larger house for the family so they could be more comfortable.

Now it seemed Joseph was looking after their spiritual welfare. Night after night he captivated the family with talk of the gold plates and the people who wrote them. The family grew closer together, and their home was peaceful and happy. Everyone felt that something wonderful was about to happen.²⁶

Then one autumn morning, less than two months after Moroni's visit, Alvin came home with an intense pain in his stomach. Bent over in agony, he begged his father to call for help. When a doctor finally arrived, he gave Alvin a large dose of a chalky medicine, but it only made things worse.

Alvin lay in bed for days, writhing in pain. Knowing he would probably die, he called for Joseph. "Do everything that lies in your power to obtain the records," Alvin said. "Be faithful in receiving instruction and keeping every commandment that is given you."²⁷

He died a short time later, and sorrow settled over the house. At the funeral, a preacher all but said Alvin had gone to hell, using his death to warn others of what would happen unless God intervened to save them. Joseph Sr.

was furious. His son had been a good young man, and he could not believe that God would damn him.²⁸

With Alvin gone, talk of the plates ended. He had been such a staunch supporter of Joseph's divine call that any mention of them brought his death to mind. The family could not bear it.

Joseph missed Alvin terribly and took his death especially hard. He had hoped to rely on his oldest brother to help him get the record. Now he felt forsaken.²⁹

When the day finally came to return to the hill, Joseph went alone. Without Alvin, he was unsure if the Lord would trust him with the plates. But he thought he could keep every commandment the Lord had given him, as his

A statue of Moroni stands atop the Hill Cumorah to commemorate the place where Joseph Smith first saw the Book of Mormon plates on September 22, 1823, and obtained them exactly four years later.



brother had counseled. Moroni's instructions for retrieving the plates were clear. "You must take them into your hands and go straight to the house without delay," the angel had said, "and lock them up."³⁰

At the hill, Joseph pried up the rock, reached into the stone box, and lifted out the plates. A thought then crossed his mind: the other items in the box were valuable and ought to be hidden before he went home. He set the plates down and turned to cover the box. But when he returned to the plates, they were gone. Alarmed, he fell to his knees and pleaded to know where they were.

Moroni appeared and told Joseph that he had failed to follow directions again. Not only had he set the plates down before safely securing them, he had also let them out of his sight. As willing as the young seer was to do the Lord's work, he was not yet able to protect the ancient record.

Joseph was disappointed in himself, but Moroni instructed him to return for the plates the following year. He also taught him more about the Lord's plan for the kingdom of God and the great work beginning to roll forth.

Still, after the angel left, Joseph slunk down the hill, worried what his family would think when he came home empty handed.³¹ When he stepped inside the house, they were waiting for him. His father asked at once if he had the plates.

"No," he said. "I could not get them."

"Did you see them?"

"I saw them but could not take them."

"I would have taken them," Joseph Sr. said, "if I had been in your place."

"You do not know what you say," Joseph said. "I could not get them, for the angel of the Lord would not let me."³² ■

A complete list of works cited is available at saints.lds.org.

The word *Topic* in the notes indicates additional information online at saints.lds.org.

NOTES

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